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S E R T Ã O

Sertão, in its original meaning, signifies any wilderness, or uncultivated region, remote from thickly populated centers. I once heard a man, in the State of Minas Geraes, remark, "I would like some day to get to a place so far back that the people would admit that they are in the sertão." In Pernambuco, and in the adjoining states of Alagoas, Paraíba and Ceará, that is not at all difficult; for there the word has come to have a more limited meaning, and is used to designate a specific region in the interior of those states, which, while partly cultivated, and sparsely inhabited, is distinctly different geographically from the coastal and intermediate zones. It is an arid plateau, cut off by mountain ranges from the moisture bearing winds from the coast. The aridity varies; in some places it is an out and out desert, while in others a limited agriculture may be practised. There are large tracts of the stunted forest called the caatinga, and vast plains covered with thorny scrub, and traversed occasionally by mountain ranges; but the same characteristic vegetation and general appearance of the country prevail throughout, and one is seldom left in doubt that he is in the sertão.

One usually enters the sertão by crossing a mountain range, and finding the descent much less than the ascent had been. Then he begins to notice that the whole country has quite a different aspect. I remember once in August, 1940, that I set out from Recife with a friend, to visit some places in the sertão of Paraíba. By mid August the rainy season in that section is usually about over; but that was an exceptionally rainy year, and the rains were still in full force. We crossed flooded streams, in one case having to be pulled by oxen where the water was too deep for the car to pass under its own power. We spent the night in Campina Grande, a city of about 30,000 population, and the chief trading center of the interior of Paraíba, and at that altitude of about 2000 feet found the night uncomfortably cold. The following morning we set out again, and soon came to a mountain range, which we crossed, and found ourselves in a totally different country, not a trace of rain, the leaves already dry and sere, and only a thin, innocuous mackerel sky remaining of the heavy overcast

we had had on the coastal slope. And at Pombal, not greatly inferior to Campina Grande in altitude, we encountered a stifling heat that made us wonder how we had ever been able to complain of the cold anywhere. Because it was an unusually rainy year, there was still water flowing in the streams; but otherwise one might have imagined that there had been no rainy season at all.

It does rain in the sertão however. In north Brazil the people refer to the rainy season as the winter (inverno); and in what the sertanejos like to consider a normal year there is a period of thunderstorms in January or February, which give the people a chance to get a crop planted and up before the scanty "winter" rain sets in; and this, in its turn, if the year is good, makes sufficient rain to finish the crop. These thunderstorms are often violent, and sometimes accompanied by hail. In a few hours time the dry river beds where the motorist, in crossing, must use care not to get stuck in the sand, may be changed to raging torrents. I knew of one case of a man whose car was stuck in trying to cross a perfectly dry watercourse, and before he could extricate it a freshet caused by a thunderstorm farther up the valley swept the car away, rolling it over and over, so that the car and all his baggage were almost a total loss. It is interesting to see how, after such a storm, the scrub which for months has been standing bare and apparently dead almost overnight will put on green leaves, and even blossoms. If this rain is not followed in time by others, these leaves will dry up and fall off; but in such a country plants as well as human kind must have courage to seize the present opportunity and hope for another, for only so can life be sustained.

The curse of the sertão is periodic drouths. In so called normal years the people gain, through agriculture, stock raising, or exploitation of mineral or forest resources, a precarious living. A year without rain is a calamity, but may even be borne. But when two, three or even four years go by with little or no rainfall, the suffering is acute. Stories are told of children four or five years old, frightened beyond measure at the sight of the first rain that has fallen in their lifetime. In such times the fittest survive. Those who hold the best springs and water holes, or the greatest resources. Their losses are heavy, but they carry on. The poorest, of



course, suffer most. When they reach the point where they can not endure any more, they set out, a whole family or a number of families together, walking across the country, seeking asylum wherever they may find it. These flagelados, as they are called, are a most pitiful sight, as, clad in the merest rags, they go begging from house to house in the towns through which they pass. We saw hundreds of them in 1942, and that was only a second year of drouth. Sometimes, as notably in the thirties, the drouth is much more prolonged. They go wandering from place to place, some of them finding employment, and others finally going to swell the already numerous army of beggars in the coastal cities.

The wonder is that people will continue to live in such a country. And yet the sertanejo is intensely proud of being such. Like the people in any frontier country, they are a hardy race, who glory in hardships, and generally speaking are staunch friends, tender lovers, and implacable foes. Life in general is rather primitive; the poor live in miserable hovels; the ranch owners have comfortable, though usually not modern, homes, and some of them are quite well to do. You may go into a country house which is unceiled, unscreened, and whose windows are only board shutters innocent of glass, and find that the rancher, although almost illiterate, is quite familiar with such cities as Recife or Fortaleza, and personally acquainted with important business people there -- or perhaps related to them.

There are good roads through many parts of the sertão, built by the federal government of Brazil as an emergency work program in the time of drouth, to give work to the people, and to make the whole region more accessible. They are wide and well graded, though surfaced only with gravel, and in many places the major bridges are still unconstructed, or were so as recently as 1948. But even so they are a great blessing to the whole region. These roads are referred to by the people as the contra seca (against the drouth) highways. They are well planned, and one occasionally finds a stretch of ten miles or more without the slightest curve.

There are mountain ranges here and there throughout the sertão, and often springs are to be found about the base of them. Springs of course are priceless in any arid country. Water for home use must often be carried long distances. Passing through the

sertão of Pernambuco once, a group of us stopped at a house and asked for water. The man gave it to us very willingly, and was quite friendly, as such people are inclined to be. Someone asked where the water came from, and if he had far to bring it, and he said no, that it was quite close -- less than a mile. But that does not mean that it was a clear running spring. To one not used to such a life, the sight of the water hole might be revolting, or even the water itself, which is frequently far from being limpid; but to a thirsty person, water is water; and after all, they seem to thrive on it.

Sometimes a peak on one of these mountain ranges reaches up high enough to catch the rain bearing winds, and then you get something really nice. The town of Triunfo, far in the sertão of Pernambuco, is located on such a peak, at the altitude of about 3500 feet. After crossing the burning plains below, one climbs by a beautifully graded road up into an entirely different world, delightfully cool, with clear springs of water and shady trees. I was told of a peak in Ceará whose summit is covered with groves of all sorts of fruit trees, and from the description must be a veritable paradise on earth.

The resources of the sertão are various. Some timber is obtained from the sparse forests, and a considerable amount of tan bark from the angico trees; and in recent years the commercial exploitation of the fibre of caroá (Neoglaziowia variegata), a wildtplant distantly related to the pineapple, has resulted in something of an industry. Cotton is the only important agricultural product for export, though corn, beans and tobacco are raised for local use. There may be important mineral deposits, but little has been done toward developing them. There is even gold. I was told of the recent discovery of gold deposits in Ceara that may prove to be extensive, but there was no water available to pan the gold with; people told of fabulous prices being paid for water, hauled in in barrels by truck for gold washing.

But the sertão is essentially a stock country. Sheep, and especially goats, are abundant, and this is one of the important sources of the world's supply of goatskins, so extensively employed in the making of ladies' shoes. Sheep and goats can subsist



with very little water. But in the greater part of this country cattle can be raised also. And the visitor will be surprised, in passing through in the dry season, when there appears to be absolutely nothing for the cattle to eat, to see them sleek and healthy, obviously well fed. The fact is that they do much better in the dry season than in the rainy season, the grass in the rainy season being sappy and almost indigestible, whereas in the dry season the cattle eat the leaves fallen from the scrub, and other such uninviting fare, and thrive on it. This is the country of the vaqueiro, the Brazilian version of our cowboy, with his leather suit and hat, which are very useful for riding through the thorny scrub where the cattle browse. The cattle are driven to market, all the long, dusty way to Recife or other cities. And of course there are milk products, butter, which is generally melted and poured into bottles for better preservation, and characteristic home-made cheese, of several different varieties, much esteemed by the Brazilians, and which the foreigner who resides long in Brazil learns to appreciate.

I was visiting once in a home in Santana de Ipanema, in the sertão of Alagoas, when the people pointed out to me a large land tortoise, kept in the back yard and fed on table scraps, awaiting a convenient day for becoming the important part of a dinner. "There are plenty of those to be found in the woods", they assured me; and they went on to tell of the tuberous roots of the imbú tree, and of various other plants and animals that could be found and used if one knew his way about. "Nobody need ever die of hunger in the sertão, they said, "unless he just wants to."